

title of a problem, it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data, and reveals, at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of not – of no longer – treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to, contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to the language (*langue*) and to speech. It is this “more” that we must reveal and describe.

*Note*

1 This is written against an explicit theme of my book *Madness and Civilization*, and one that recurs particularly in the Preface.

# CHAPTER 11

## “Plato’s Pharmacy”<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Derrida

Let us read [Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*] more closely. At the precisely calculated center of the dialogue – the reader can count the lines – the question of *logography* is raised (257e). Phaedrus reminds Socrates that the citizens of greatest influence and dignity, the men who are the most free, feel ashamed (*aiskhunontai*) at “speechwriting” and at leaving *sungrammata* behind them. They fear the judgment of posterity, which might consider them “sophists” (257d). The logographer, in the strict sense, is a ghost writer who composes speeches for use by litigants, speeches which he himself does not pronounce, which he does not attend, so to speak, in person, and which produce their effects in his absence. In writing what he does not speak, what he would never say and, in truth, would probably never even think, the author of the written speech is already entrenched in the posture of the sophist: the man of non-presence and of non-truth. Writing is thus already on the scene. The incompatibility between the written and the true is clearly announced at the moment Socrates starts to recount the way in which men are carried out of themselves by pleasure, become absent from themselves, forget themselves and die in the thrill of song (259). . . .

Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*). This *pharmakon*, this “medicine,” this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent. The *pharmakon* would be a substance – with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy – if we didn’t have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity [literally, “othersidedness”] of what constitutes it and the infinite absence of what dissolves it.

Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one’s general, natural, habitual paths and laws. Here, it takes Socrates out of his proper place and off his customary track. The latter had always kept him inside the city. The leaves of writing act as a *pharmakon* to push or attract out of the city the one who never

wanted to get out, even at the end, to escape the hemlock. They take him out of himself and draw him onto a path that is properly an exodus:

*Phaedrus*: Anyone would take you, as you say, for a foreigner being shown the country by a guide, and not a native – you never leave town to cross the frontier nor even, I believe, so much as set foot outside the walls.

*Socrates*: You must forgive me, dear friend; I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. Yet you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out (*dokeis moi tes emes exou to pharmakon heurekenai*). A hungry animal can be driven by dangling a carrot or a bit of greenstuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me speeches bound in books (*en bibliois*) I don't doubt you can cart me all round Attica, and anywhere else you please. Anyhow, now that we've got here I propose for the time being to lie down, and you can choose whatever posture you think most convenient for reading, and proceed. (230d–e)

It is at this point, when Socrates has finally stretched out on the ground and Phaedrus has taken the most comfortable position for handling the text or, if you will, the *pharmakon*, that the discussion actually gets off the ground. A spoken speech – whether by Lysias or by Phaedrus in person – a speech proffered in the present, in the presence of Socrates, would not have had the same effect. Only the *logoi en bibliois*, only words that are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up, words that force one to wait for them in the form and under cover of a solid object, letting themselves be desired for the space of a walk, only hidden letters can thus get Socrates moving. If speech could be purely present, unveiled, naked, offered up in person in its truth, without the detours of a signifier foreign to it, if at the limit an undefined logos were possible, it would not seduce anyone. It would not draw Socrates, as if under the effects of a *pharmakon*, out of his way. Let us get ahead of ourselves. Already: writing, the *pharmakon*, the going or leading astray.

In our discussion of this text we have been using an authoritative French translation of Plato, the one published by Guillaume Budé. In the case of the *Phaedrus*, the translation is by Léon Robin. We will continue to refer to it, inserting the Greek text in parentheses, however, whenever it seems opportune or pertinent to our point. Hence, for example, the word *pharmakon*. In this way we hope to display in the most striking manner the regular, ordered polysemy that has, through skewing, indeterminacy, or overdetermination, but without mistranslation, permitted the rendering of the same word by “remedy,” “recipe,” “poison,” “drug,” “philter,” etc. It will also be seen to what extent the malleable unity of this concept, or rather its rules and the strange logic that links it with its signifier, has been dispersed, masked, obliterated, and rendered almost unreadable not only by the imprudence or empiricism of the translators, but first and foremost by the redoubtable, irreducible difficulty of translation. It is a difficulty inherent in its very principle, situated less in the passage from one language to another, from one philosophical language to another, than already, as we shall see, in the tradition

between Greek and Greek; a violent difficulty in the transference of a nonphilosopheme into a philosopheme. With this problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the very passage into philosophy. . . .

The extent of the difficulty is marked out – this is, among a hundred others, the example that retains us here – in that the truth – the original truth about writing as a *pharmakon* will at first be left up to a myth. The myth of Theuth, to which we now turn. . . .

### The Father of Logos

The story begins like this:

*Socrates*: Very well. I heard, then, that at Naucratis in Egypt there lived one of the old gods of that country, the one whose sacred bird is called the ibis; and the name of the divinity was Theuth. It was he who first invented numbers and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing (*grammata*). Now the King of all Egypt at that time was Thamus who lived in the great city of the upper region which the Greeks call the Egyptian Thebes; the god himself they call Ammon. Theuth came to him and exhibited his arts and declared that they ought to be imparted to the other Egyptians. And Thamus questioned him about the usefulness of each one; and as Theuth enumerated, the King blamed or praised what he thought were the good or bad points in the explanation. Now Thamus is said to have had a good deal to remark on both sides of the question about every single art (it would take too long to repeat it here); but when it came to writing, Theuth said, “This discipline (*to mathēma*), my King, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories (*sophōterous kai mnēmonikōterous*): my invention is a recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom.” But the King said . . . etc. (274c–e)

Let us cut the King off here. He is faced with the *pharmakon*. His reply will be incisive.

Let us freeze the scene and the characters. Let's look. Writing (or, if you will, the *pharmakon*) is thus presented to the King. Presented: like a kind of present offered up in homage by a vassal to his lord. (Theuth is a demigod speaking to the king of the gods), but above all as a finished work submitted to his appreciation. And this work is itself an art, a worker's power, an operative virtue. This artefactum is an art. But the value of this gift is still uncertain. The value of writing – or of the *pharmakon* – has of course been spelled out to the King, but it is the King who will give it its value, who will set the price of what, in the act of receiving, he constitutes or institutes. The king or god (Thamus represents Ammon,<sup>2</sup> the king of the gods, the king of kings, the god of gods. Theuth says to him: *Ô basileu*) is thus the other name for the origin of value. The value of writing will not be itself,

writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god-the-king approves of it. But god-the-king nonetheless experiences the *pharmakon* as a product, an *ergon*, which is not his own, which comes to him from outside but also from below, and which awaits his condescending judgment in order to be consecrated in its being and value. God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. He has no need to write. He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices. Whether a scribe from his secretarial staff then adds the supplement of a transcription or not, that consignment is always in essence secondary.

From this position, without rejecting the homage, the god-king will deprecate it, pointing out not only its uselessness but its menace and its mischief. Another way of not receiving the offering of writing. In so doing, god-the-king-that-speaks is acting like a father. The *pharmakon* is here presented to the father and is by him rejected, belittled, abandoned, disparaged. The father is always suspicious and watchful toward writing.

Even if we did not want to give in here to the easy passage uniting the figures of the king, the god, and the father, it would suffice to pay systematic attention – which to our knowledge has never been done – to the permanence of a Platonic schema that assigns the origin and power of speech, precisely of *logos*, to the paternal position. Not that this happens especially and exclusively in Plato. Everyone knows this or can easily imagine it. But the fact that “Platonism,” which sets up the whole of Western metaphysics in its conceptuality, should not escape the generality of this structural constraint, and even illustrates it with incomparable subtlety and force, stands out as all the more significant.

Not that *logos* is the father, either. But the origin of *logos* is its father. One could say anachronously that the “speaking subject” is the father of his speech. And one would quickly realize that this is no metaphor, at least not in the sense of any common, conventional effect of rhetoric. *Logos* is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his very presence without the present attendance of his father. His father who answers. His father who speaks for him and answers for him. Without his father, he would be nothing but, in fact, writing. At least that is what is said by the one who says: it is the father’s thesis. The specificity of writing would thus be intimately bound to the absence of the father. Such an absence can of course exist along very diverse modalities, distinctly or confusedly; successively or simultaneously: to have lost one’s father, through natural or violent death, through random violence or patricide; and then to solicit the aid and attendance, possible or impossible, of the paternal presence, to solicit it directly or to claim to be getting along without it, etc. The reader will have noted Socrates’ insistence on the misery, whether pitiful or arrogant, of a *logos* committed to writing. . . .

...A *logos* indebted to a father; what does that mean? At least how can it be read within the stratum of the Platonic text that interests us here?

...The figure of the father, of course, is also that of the good (*agathon*). *Logos* represents what it is indebted to: the father who is also chief, capital, and good(s). Or rather the chief, the capital, the good(s). *Pater* in Greek means all that at once.

Neither translators nor commentators of Plato seem to have accounted for the play of these schemas. It is extremely difficult, we must recognize, to respect this play in a translation, and the fact can at least be explained in that no one has ever raised the question. Thus, at the point in the *Republic* where Socrates backs away from speaking of the good in itself (VI, 506e), he immediately suggests replacing it with its *ekgonos*, its son, its offspring:

Let us dismiss for the time being the nature of the good in itself, for to attain to my present surmise of that seems a pitch above the impulse that wings my flight today. But what seems to be the offspring (*ekgonos*) of the good and most nearly made in its likeness I am willing to speak if you too wish it, and otherwise to let the matter drop.

Well, speak on, he said, for you will duly pay me the tale of the parent another time.

I could wish, I said, that I were able to make and you to receive the payment, and not merely as now the interest (*tokous*). But at any rate receive this interest and the offspring of the good (*tokon te kai ekgonon autou tou agathou*).

*Tokos*, which is here associated with *ekgonos*, signifies production and the product, birth and the child, etc. This word functions with this meaning in the domains of agriculture, of kinship relations, and of fiduciary operations. None of these domains, as we shall see, lies outside the investment and possibility of a *logos*.

As product, the *tokos* is the child, the human or animal brood, as well as the fruits of the seed sown in the field, and the interest on a capital investment: it is a *return* or *revenue*. The distribution of all these meanings can be followed in Plato’s text. The meaning of *pater* is sometimes even inflected in the exclusive sense of financial capital. In the *Republic* itself, and not far from the passage we have just quoted. One of the drawbacks of democracy lies in the role that capital is often allowed to play in it: “But these money-makers with down-bent heads, pretending not even to see the poor, but inserting the sting of their money into any of the remainder who do not resist, and harvesting from them in interest as it were a manifold progeny of the parent sum (*tou patros ekgonous tokous pollaplasiou*), foster the drone and pauper element in the state” (555e).

Now, about this father, this capital, this good, this origin of value and of appearing beings, it is not possible to speak simply or directly. First of all because it is no more possible to look them in the face than to stare at the sun. On the subject of this bedazzlement before the face of the sun, a rereading of the famous passage of the *Republic* (VII, 515c ff.) is strongly recommended here.<sup>3</sup>

Thus will Socrates evoke only the visible sun, the son that resembles the father, the *analogon* of the intelligible sun: “It was the sun, then, that I meant when I spoke of that offspring of the Good (*ton tou agathou ekgonon*), which the Good has created in its own image (*ton tagathon egennēsen analogon heautōi*), and which stands in the visible world in the same relation to vision and visible things as that which the good itself bears in the intelligible world to intelligence and to intelligible objects” (508c).

How does *logos* intercede in this analogy between the father and the son, the *nooumena* and the *horōmena*?

The Good, in the visible-invisible figure of the father, the sun, or capital, is the origin of all *onta*, responsible for their appearing and their coming into *logos*, which both assembles and distinguishes them: "We predicate 'to be' of many beautiful things and many good things, saying of them severally that they are, and so define them in our speech (*einai phamen te kai diorizomen tōi logōi*)" (507b).

The good (father, sun, capital) is thus the hidden illuminating, blinding source of *logos* . . .

As the god of language second and of linguistic difference, Thoth can become the god of the creative word only by metonymic substitution, by historical displacement, and sometimes by violent subversion.

This type of substitution thus puts Thoth *in Ra's place* as the moon takes the place of the sun. The god of writing thus supplies the place of Ra [the father god], supplementing him and supplanting him in his absence and essential disappearance. Such is the origin of the moon as supplement to the sun, of night light as supplement to daylight. And writing as the supplement of speech. "One day while Ra was in the sky, he said: 'Bring me Thoth,' and Thoth was straightway brought to him. The Majesty of this god said to Thoth: 'Be in the sky in my place, while I shine over the blessed of the lower regions . . . You are in my place, my replacement, and you will be called thus: Thoth, he who replaces Ra.' Then all sorts of things sprang up thanks to the play of Ra's words. He said to Thoth: 'I will cause you to embrace (*ionh*) the two skies with your beauty and your rays' – and thus the moon (*ioh*) was born. Later, alluding to the fact that Thoth, as Ra's replacement, occupies a somewhat subordinate position: 'I will cause you to send (*hōb*) greater ones than yourself' – and thus was born the Ibis (*hib*), the bird of Thoth."<sup>4</sup>

This substitution, which thus functions as a pure play of traces or supplements or, again, operates within the order of the pure signifier which no reality, no absolutely external reference, no transcendental signified, can come to limit, bound, or control; this substitution, which could be judged "mad" since it can go on infinitely in the element of the linguistic permutation of substitutes, of substitutes for substitutes; this unleashed chain is nevertheless not lacking in violence. One would not have understood anything of this "linguistic" "immanence" if one saw it as the peaceful milieu of a merely fictional war, an inoffensive word-play, in contrast to some raging *polemos* in "reality." It is not in any reality foreign to the "play of words" that Thoth also frequently participates in plots, perfidious intrigues, conspiracies to usurp the throne. He helps the sons do away with the father, the brothers do away with the brother that has become king. . . .

As a substitute capable of doubling for the king, the father, the sun, and speech, distinguished from these only as their representation, repetition, and mask, Thoth was naturally also capable of totally supplanting them and appropriating all their attributes. He is added as the essential attribute of what he is added to, and from which almost nothing distinguishes him. He differs from speech or divine light only as the revealer from the revealed. Barely.<sup>5</sup>

But before, as it were, his adequacy of replacement and usurpation, Thoth is essentially the god of writing . . .

For it goes without saying that the god of writing must also be the god of death. We should not forget that, in the *Phaedrus*, another thing held against the invention of the *pharmakon* is that it substitutes the breathless sign for the living voice, claims to do without the father (who is both living and life-giving) of *logos*, and can no more answer for itself than a sculpture or inanimate painting, etc. In all the cycles of Egyptian mythology, Thoth presides over the organization of death. The master of writing, numbers, and calculation does not merely write down the weight of dead souls; he first counts out the days of life, enumerates history. His arithmetic thus covers the events of divine biography. He is "the one who measures the length of the lives of gods and men."<sup>6</sup> He behaves like a chief of funereal protocol, charged in particular with the dressing of the dead. . . .

The hierarchical opposition between son and father, subject and king, death and life, writing and speech, etc., naturally completes its system with that between night and day, West and East, moon and sun. Thoth, the "nocturnal representative of Ra, the bull among the stars,"<sup>7</sup> turns toward the west. He is the god of the moon, either as identified with it or as its protector.<sup>8</sup>

The system of these traits brings into play an original kind of logic: the figure of Thoth is opposed to its other (father, sun, life, speech, origin or orient, etc.), but as that which at once supplements and supplants it. Thoth extends or opposes by repeating or replacing. By the same token, the figure of Thoth takes shape and takes its shape from the very thing it resists and substitutes for. But it thereby opposes *itself*, passes into its other, and this messenger-god is truly a god of the absolute passage between opposites. If he had any identity – but he is precisely the god of nonidentity – he would be that *coincidentia oppositorum* to which we will soon have recourse again. In distinguishing himself from his opposite, Thoth also imitates it, becomes its sign and representative, obeys it and *conforms* to it, replaces it, by violence if need be. He is thus the father's other, the father, and the subversive movement of replacement. The god of writing is thus at once his father, his son, and himself. He cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play.

This god of resurrection is less interested in life or death than in death as a repetition of life and life as a rehearsal of death, in the awakening of life and in the recommencement of death. This is what numbers, of which he is also the inventor and patron, mean. Thoth repeats everything in the addition of the supplement: in adding to and doubling as the sun, he is other than the sun and the same as it; other than the good and the same, etc. Always taking a place not his own, a place one could call that of the dead or the dummy, he has neither a proper place nor a proper name. His propriety or property [self-identity, *propriété*] is impropriety or inappropriateness, the floating indeterminacy that allows for substitution and play, *Play*, of which he is also the inventor, as Plato himself reminds us. It is to him that we owe the games of dice (*kubetia*) and draughts (*petteia*) (274d). He would be the mediating movement of dialectics if he did not also mimic it, indefinitely preventing

it, through this ironic doubling, from reaching some final fulfillment or eschatological reappropriation. Thoth is never present. Nowhere does he appear in person. No being-there can properly be *his own*.

Every act of his is marked by this unstable ambivalence. This god of calculation, arithmetic, and rational science<sup>9</sup> also presides over the occult sciences, astrology and alchemy. He is the god of magic formulas that calm the sea, of secret accounts, of hidden texts: an archetype of Hermes, god of cryptography no less than of every other -graphy. . . .

The system of these . . . features is reconstituted when, in the *Phaedrus*, King Thamus depresses and deprecates the *pharmakon* of writing, a word that should thus not too hastily be considered a metaphor, unless the metaphorical possibility is allowed to retain all its power of enigma. Perhaps we can now read the King's response:

But the king said, "Theuth, my master of arts (*Ôtekhnikōtate Theuth*), to one man it is given to create the elements of an art, to another to judge the extent of harm and usefulness it will have for those who are going to employ it. And now, since you are father of written letters (*patēr ὁν γραμμάτων*), your paternal goodwill has led you to pronounce the very opposite (*touantion*) of what is their real power. The fact is that this invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it because they will not need to exercise their memories (*λήθην men en psuchais parexei mnēmēs ameletēsiai*), being able to rely on what is written, using the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves (*dia pistin graphēs exōthen hup' allotriōn tupōn*) rather than, from within, their own unaided powers to call things to mind (*ouk endothen autous huph' hautōn anamimnēskomenous*). So it's not a remedy for memory, but for reminding, that you have discovered (*oukoun mnēmēs, alla hupomnēseōs, pharmakon hēures*). And as for wisdom (*sophias de*), you're equipping your pupils with only a semblance (*doxan*) of it, not with truth (*alēthian*). Thanks to you and your invention, your pupils will be widely read without benefit of a teacher's instruction; in consequence, they'll entertain the delusion that they have wide knowledge, while they are, in fact, for the most part incapable of real judgment. They will also be difficult to get on with since they will be men filled with the conceit of wisdom (*doxosophoi*), not men of wisdom (*anti sophōn*)."<sup>10</sup> (274e-275b)

The king, the father of speech, has thus asserted his authority over the father of writing. And he has done so with severity, without showing the one who occupies the place of his son any of that paternal good will exhibited by Theuth toward his own children, his "letters." Thamus presses on, multiplies his reservations, and visibly wants to leave Theuth no hope.

In order for writing to produce, as he says, the "opposite" effect from what one might expect, in order for this *pharmakon* to show itself, with use, to be injurious, its effectiveness, its power, its *dunamis* must, of course, be ambiguous. As is said of the *pharmakon* in the *Protagoras*, the *Philebus*, the *Timaeus*. It is precisely this ambiguity that Plato, through the mouth of the King, attempts to master, to dominate by inserting its definition into simple, clear-cut oppositions: good and evil, inside and outside, true and false, essence and appearance. If one rereads the

reasons adduced by the royal sentence, one will find this series of oppositions there. And set in place in such a way that the *pharmakon*, or, if you will, writing, can only go around in circles: writing is only apparently good for memory, seemingly able to help it from within, through its own motion, to know what is true. But in truth, writing is essentially bad, external to memory, productive not of science but of belief, not of truth but of appearances. The *pharmakon* produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth, etc.

But while, in the *Philebus* and the *Protagoras*, the *pharmakon*, because it is painful, seems bad whereas it is beneficial, here, in the *Phaedrus* as in the *Timaeus* it is passed off as a helpful remedy whereas it is in truth harmful. Bad ambiguity is thus opposed to good ambiguity, a deceitful intention to a mere appearance. Writing's case is grave.

It is not enough to say that writing is conceived out of this or that series of oppositions. Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of *opposition* as such. In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other, which means that one of these oppositions (the opposition between inside and outside) must already be accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition. And one of the elements of the system (or of the series) must also stand as the very possibility of systematicity or seriality in general. And if one got to thinking that something like the *pharmakon* – or writing – far from being governed by these oppositions, opens up their very possibility without letting itself be comprehended by them; if one got to thinking that it can only be out of something like writing – or the *pharmakon* – that the strange difference between inside and outside can spring; if, consequently, one got to thinking that writing as a *pharmakon* cannot simply be assigned a site within what it situates, cannot be subsumed under concepts whose contours it draws, leaves only its ghost to a logic that can only seek to govern it insofar as logic arises from it – one would then have to bend [plier] into strange contortions what could no longer even simply be called logic or discourse. All the more so if what we have just imprudently called a *ghost* can no longer be distinguished, with the same assurance, from truth, reality, living flesh, etc. One must accept the fact that here, for once, to leave a ghost behind will in a sense be to salvage nothing. . . .

If writing, according to the king and under the sun, produces the opposite effect from what is expected, if the *pharmakon* is pernicious, it is because, like the one in the *Timaeus*, it doesn't come from around here. It comes from afar, it is *external* or alien: to the living, which is the right-here of the inside, to *logos* as the *zōon* it claims to assist or relieve. The imprints (*tupoi*) of writing do not inscribe themselves this time, as they do in the hypothesis of the *Theaetetus*, in the wax of the soul *in intaglio*, thus corresponding to the spontaneous, autochthonous motions of psychic life. Knowing that he can always leave his thoughts outside or check them with an external agency, with the physical, spatial, superficial marks that one lays flat on a tablet, he who has the *tekhnē* of writing at his disposal will come to rely on it. He will know that he himself can leave without the *tupoi*'s going away, that he can

forget all about them without their leaving his service. They will represent him even if he forgets them; they will transmit his word even if he is not there to animate them. Even if he is dead, and only a *pharmakon* can be the wielder of such power, over death but also in cahoots with it. The *pharmakon* and writing are thus always involved in questions of life and death.

Can it be said without conceptual anachronism – and thus without serious interpretive error – that the *tupoi* are the representatives, the *physical* surrogates of the *psychic* that is absent? It would be better to assert that the written traces no longer even belong to the order of the *phusis*, since they are not alive. They do not grow; they grow no more than what could be sown, as Socrates will say in a minute, with a reed (*kalamos*). They do violence to the natural, autonomous organization of the *mnēmē*, in which *phusis* and *psuchē* are not opposed. If writing does belong to the *phusis*, wouldn't it be to that moment of the *phusis*, to that necessary movement through which its truth, the production of its appearing, tends, says Heraclitus, to take shelter in its crypt? "Cryptogram" thus condenses in a single word a pleonastic proposition.

If one takes the king's word for it, then, it is this life of the memory that the *pharmakon* of writing would come to hypnotize: fascinating it, taking it out of itself by putting it to sleep in a monument. Confident of the permanence and independence of its *types* (*tupoi*), memory will fall asleep, will not keep itself up, will no longer keep to keeping itself alert, present, as close as possible to the truth of what is. Letting itself get turned to stone by its own signs, its own guardians, by the types committed to the keeping and surveillance of knowledge, it will sink down into *lēthē*, overcome by nonknowledge and forgetfulness.<sup>10</sup> Memory and truth cannot be separated. The movement of *alētheia* is a deployment of *mnēmē* through and through. A deployment of living memory, of memory as psychic life in its self-presentation to itself. The powers of *lethe* simultaneously increase the domains of death, of nontruth, of nonknowledge. This is why writing, at least insofar as it sows "forgetfulness in the soul," turns us toward the inanimate and toward nonknowledge. But it cannot be said that its essence simply and *presently* confounds it with death or nontruth. For writing *has* no essence or value of its own, whether positive or negative. It plays within the simulacrum. It is in its type the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth, etc. That is why men of writing appear before the eye of God not as wise men (*sophoi*) but in truth as *fake* or self-proclaimed wise men (*doxosophoi*).

This is Plato's definition of the sophist. For it is above all against sophistics that this diatribe against writing is directed: it can be inscribed within the interminable trial instituted by Plato, under the name of philosophy, against the sophists. The man who relies on writing, who brags about the knowledge and powers it assures him, this simulator unmasked by Thamus has all the features of a sophist: "the imitator of him who knows," as the *Sophist* puts it (*mimētēs tou sophou*, 268c). . . .

What Plato is attacking in sophistics, therefore, is not simply recourse to memory but, within such recourse, the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory, of the prosthesis for the organ; the perversion that consists of replacing a limb by

a thing, here, substituting the passive, mechanical "by-heart" for the active reanimation of knowledge, for its reproduction in the present. The boundary (between inside and outside, living and nonliving) separates not only speech from writing but also memory as an unveiling (re-)producing a presence from re-memoration as the mere repetition of a monument; truth as distinct from its sign, being as distinct from types. The "outside" does not begin at the point where what we now call the psychic and the physical meet, but at the point where the *mnēmē*, instead of being present to itself in its life as a movement of truth, is supplanted by the archive, evicted by a sign of re-memoration or of com-memoration. The space of writing, space as writing, is opened up in the violent movement of this surrogation, in the difference between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*. The outside is already within the work of memory. The evil slips in within the relation of memory to itself, in the general organization of the mnesic activity. Memory is finite by nature. Plato recognizes this in attributing life to it. As in the case of all living organisms, he assigns it, as we have seen, certain limits. A limitless memory would in any event be not memory but infinite self-presence. Memory always therefore already needs signs in order to recall the nonpresent, with which it is necessarily in relation. The movement of dialectics bears witness to this. Memory is thus contaminated by its first substitute: *hypomnēsis*. But what Plato *dreams of* is a memory with no sign. That is, with no supplement. A *mnēmē* with no *hypomnēsis*, no *pharmakon*. And this at the very moment and for the very reason that he calls *dream* the confusion between the hypothetical and the anhypothetical in the realm of mathematical intelligibility (*Republic*, 533b).

Why is the surrogate or supplement dangerous? It is not, so to speak, dangerous in itself, in that aspect of it that can present itself as a thing, as a being-present. In that case it would be reassuring. But here, the supplement is not, is not a being (*on*). It is nevertheless not a simple nonbeing (*mē on*), either. Its slidings slip it out of the simple alternative presence/absence. *That* is the danger. And that is what enables the type always to pass for the original. As soon as the supplementary outside is opened, its structure implies that the supplement itself can be "typed," replaced by its double, and that a supplement to the supplement, a surrogate for the surrogate, is possible and necessary. Necessary because this movement is not a sensible, "empirical" accident: it is linked to the ideality of the *eidos* as the possibility of the repetition of the same. And writing appears to Plato (and after him to all of philosophy, which is as such constituted in this gesture) as that process of redoubling in which we are fatally drawn along: the supplement of a supplement, the signifier, the representative of a representative. (A series whose first term or rather whose first structure does not yet – but we will do it later – have to be overturned and its irreducibility made apparent.) The structure and history of *phonetic* writing have of course played a decisive role in the determination of writing as the doubling of a sign, the sign of a sign. The signifier of a phonic signifier. While the phonic signifier would remain in animate proximity, in the living presence of *mnēmē* or *psuchē*, the graphic signifier, which reproduces it or imitates it, goes one degree further away, falls outside of life, pulls life out of itself and puts it to sleep

in the type of its double. Whence the *pharmakon*'s two misdeeds: it dulls the *memory*, and if it is of any assistance at all, it is not for the *mnēmē* but for *hypomnēsis*. Instead of quickening life in the original, "in person," the *pharmakon* can at best only restore its monuments. It is a debilitating poison for memory, but a remedy or tonic for its external signs, its *symptoms*, with everything that this word can connote in Greek: an empirical, contingent, superficial event, generally a fall or collapse, distinguishing itself like an index from whatever it is pointing to. Your writing cures only the symptom, the King has already said, and it is from him that we know the unbridgeable difference between the essence of the symptom and the essence of the signified; and that writing belongs to the order and exteriority of the symptom.

Thus, even though writing is external to (internal) memory, even though hypomnesia is not in itself memory, it affects memory and hypnotizes it in its very inside. That is the effect of this *pharmakon*. If it were purely external, writing would leave the intimacy or integrity of psychic memory untouched. And yet, just as Rousseau and Saussure will do in response to the same necessity, yet without discovering other relations between the intimate and the alien, Plato maintains both the exteriority of writing and its power of maleficent penetration, its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside. The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself at once be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing.

If, instead of meditating on the structure that makes such supplementarity possible, if above all instead of meditating on the reduction by which "Plato-Rousseau-Saussure" try in vain to master it with an odd kind of "reasoning," one were to content oneself with pointing to the "logical contradiction," one would have to recognize here an instance of that kind of "kettle-logic" to which Freud turns in the *Traumdeutung* in order to illustrate the logic of dreams. In his attempt to arrange everything in his favor, the defendant piles up contradictory arguments: (1) The kettle I am returning to you is brand new; (2) The holes were already in it when you lent it to me; (3) You never lent me a kettle, anyway. Analogously: (1) Writing is rigorously exterior and inferior to living memory and speech, which are therefore undamaged by it. (2) Writing is harmful to them because it puts them to sleep and infects their very life which would otherwise remain intact. (3) Anyway, if one has resorted to hypomnesia and writing at all, it is not for their intrinsic value, but because living memory is finite, it already has holes in it before writing ever comes to leave its traces. Writing has no effect on memory.

The opposition between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis* would thus preside over the meaning of writing. This opposition will appear to us to form a system with all the great structural oppositions of Platonism. What is played out at the boundary line between these two concepts is consequently something like the major decision of philosophy, the one through which it institutes itself, maintains itself, and contains its adverse deeps.

Nevertheless, between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*, between memory and its supple-

ment, the line is more than subtle; it is hardly perceptible. On both sides of that line, it is a question of *repetition*. Live memory repeats the presence of the *eidos*, and truth is also the possibility of repetition through recall. Truth unveils the *eidos* or the *ontos on*, in other words, that which can be imitated, reproduced, repeated in its identity. But in the anamnesic movement of truth, what is repeated must present itself as such, as what it is, in repetition. The true is repeated; it is what is repeated in the repetition, what is represented and present in the representation. It is not the repeater in the repetition, nor the signifier in the signification. The true is the presence of the *eidos* signified.

Sophistics – the deployment of hypomnesia – as well as dialectics – the deployment of anamnesia – both presuppose the possibility of repetition. But sophistics this time keeps to the other side, to the other face, as it were, of repetition. And of signification. What is repeated is the repeater, the imitator, the signifier, the representative, in the absence, as it happens, of the thing itself, which these appear to reedit, and without psychic or mnemonic animation, without the living tension of dialectics. Writing would indeed be the signifier's capacity to repeat itself by itself, mechanically, without a living soul to sustain or attend it in its repetition, that is to say, without truth's being present anywhere. . . .

The counterspell, the exorcism, the antidote, is dialectics. In answer to Cebes, Socrates recommends seeking not only a magician but also – the surest incantation – training in dialectics: "Seek for him among all peoples, far and wide, sparing neither pains nor money; for there is no better way of spending your money. And you must seek among yourselves, too; for you will not find others better suited for the task" (*Phaedo*, 78a-b). ↗

To seek "among yourselves" by mutual questioning and self-examination, to seek to know oneself through the detour of the language of the other, such is the undertaking presented by Socrates, who recalls the Delphic inscription (*tou Delphikou grammatos*), to Alcibiades as the antidote (*alexipharmakon*), the counterpotion. In the text of the *Laws* which we left off quoting earlier, when the necessity of the letter has been firmly laid down, the introjection or internalization of the *grammata* into the judge's soul – their most secure dwelling-place – is then prescribed as an antidote. Let us pick up the thread of the text again:

He that would show himself a righteously equal judge must keep these matters before his eyes; he must procure books on the subject, and must make them his study. There is, in truth, no study whatsoever so potent as this of law, if the law be what it should be, to make a better man of its student – else 'twould be for nothing that the law which so stirs our worship and wonder bears a name so cognate with that of understanding [*nomos/nous*]. Furthermore, consider all other discourse, poesy with its eulogies and its satires, or utterances in prose, whether in literature or in the common converse of daily life, with their contentious disagreements and their too often unmeaning admissions. The one certain touchstone of all is the writings of the legislator (*ta tou nomothetou grammata*). The good judge will possess those writings within his own soul (*ha dei kekītēmenon en hautōi*) as antidotes (*alexipharmaka*) against other discourse, and thus he will be the state's preserver as well as his own. He will secure in the good the

retention and increase of their rectitude, and in the evil, or those of them whose vicious principles admit remedy, will promote, so far as he can, conversion from folly, from profligacy, from cowardice, in a word, from all forms of wrong. As for those who are fatally attached to such principles, if our judges and their superiors prescribe death as a cure (*iama*) for a soul in that state, they will, as has been more than once said already, deserve the praise of the community for their conduct. (XII, 957c–958a; emphasis mine)

Anamnesic dialectics, as the repetition of the *eidos*, cannot be distinguished from self-knowledge and self-mastery. Those are the best forms of exorcism that can be applied against the terrors of the child faced with death and the quackery of the bogeyman. Philosophy consists of offering reassurance to children. That is, if one prefers, of taking them out of childhood, of forgetting about the child, or, inversely, but by the same token, of speaking first and foremost for that little boy within us, of teaching him to speak – to dialogue – by displacing his fear or his desire.

*Poison against another poison*

One could play at classifying, within the weave of *The Statesman* (280a ff.), that species of protection (*amunterion*) that is called dialectics and apprehended as a counterpoison. Among the things that can be called artificial (manufactured or acquired), the Stranger distinguishes those with the function of doing something (tending toward *poiein*) and those, called defenses (*amunteria*), with the function of preventing suffering (*to me paskhein*). Among the latter, one can distinguish (1) *antidotes* (*alexipharmaka*), which can be either human or divine (and dialectics is from this perspective the very antidoteness of the antidote in general, before any possibility of dividing it up between the human and the divine. Dialectics is precisely the passage between the two) and (2) *problems* (*problematon*): what stands before one – obstacles, shelters, armor, shields, defenses. Leaving antidotes aside, the Stranger pursues the division of the *problematon*, which can function either as armaments or as fences. The fences (*phragmata*) are screens or protections (*alexeteria*) against storm and heat; these protections can be housings or coverings; coverings can be spread below (like rugs) or wrapped around, etc. The process of division goes on through the different techniques for manufacturing these wraps until it reaches the woven garment and the art of weaving: the *problematic space* of protection. This art would thus rule out, if one follows the divisions literally, all recourse to antidotes, and consequently, to that species of antidote or inverted *pharmakon* constituted by dialectics. The text excludes dialectics. And yet, it will nevertheless be necessary later to distinguish between two sorts of texture, if one bears in mind that dialectics is also an art of weaving, a science of the *sumploke* [conjunction]. . . .

The *eidos*, truth, law, the *episteme*, dialectics, philosophy – all these are other names for that *pharmakon* that must be opposed to the *pharmakon* of the Sophists and to the bewitching fear of death. It is *pharmakeus* against *pharmakeus*, *pharmakon* against *pharmakon*. This is why Socrates heeds the Laws as though, through their voices, he were under the power of an initiatic spell, a sonorous spell, then, or rather, a phonic spell, one that penetrates and carries away the inner courts of the soul. "That, my dear friend Crito, I do assure you, is what I seem to hear them saying,

just as a Corybant seems to hear the strains of music, and the sound of their arguments (*hē ēkhē toutōn tōn logōn*) rings so loudly in my head that I cannot hear the other side" (54d). Those Corybants, that music, are evoked by Alcibiades in the *Symposium* in his efforts to describe the effects of the Socratic utterance: "the moment I hear him speak I am smitten with a kind of sacred rage, worse than any Corybant, and my heart jumps into my mouth" (215e).

The philosophical, epistemic order of logos as an antidote, as a force *inscribed within the general alogical economy of the pharmakon* is not something we are proposing here as a daring interpretation of Platonism. Let us, rather, look at the prayer that opens the *Critias*: "I call on the god to grant us that most effective medicine (*pharmakon teleotaton*), that best of all medicines (*ariston pharmakon*): knowledge (*epistemēn*). . . .

Philosophy thus opposes to its other this transmutation of the drug into a remedy, of the poison into a counterpoison. Such an operation would not be possible if the *pharmako-logos* did not already harbor within itself that complicity of contrary values, and if the *pharmakon* in general were not, prior to any distinction-making, that which, presenting itself as a poison, may turn out to be a cure, may retrospectively reveal itself in the truth of its curative power. The "essence" of the *pharmakon* lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no "proper" characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a *substance*. The *pharmakon* has no ideal identity; it is aneidetic, firstly because it is not monoeidetic (in the sense in which the *Phaedo* speaks of the *eidos* as something simple, noncomposite: *monooides*). This "medicine" is not a simple thing. But neither is it a composite, a sensible or empirical *suntheton* partaking of several simple essences. It is rather the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced, along with the opposition between the *eidos* and its other; this medium is analogous to the one that will, subsequent to and according to the decision of philosophy, be reserved for transcendental imagination, that "art hidden in the depths of the soul," which belongs neither simply to the sensible nor simply to the intelligible, neither simply to passivity nor simply to activity. The element-medium will always be analogous to a mixed-medium. In a certain way, Plato thought about and even formulated this ambivalence. But he did so in passing, incidentally, discreetly: in connection with the union of opposites within virtue, not the union of virtue with its opposite. . . .

If the *pharmakon* is "ambivalent," it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.). It is on the basis of this play or movement that the opposites or differences are stopped by Plato. The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the difference of difference. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the differends that the process of discrimination will come to carve out. Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve. Already inhabited by

*difference*  
*produces*  
*generates*

difference, this reserve, even though it "precedes" the opposition between different effects, even though it preexists differences as effects, does not have the punctual simplicity of a *coincidentia oppositorum*. It is from this fund that dialectics draws its philosophemes. The *pharmakon*, without being anything in itself, always exceeds them in constituting their foundationless foundation or reserve [*fonds sans fond*]. It keeps itself forever in reserve even though it has no fundamental profundity nor ultimate locality. We will watch it infinitely promise itself and endlessly vanish through concealed doorways that shine like mirrors and open onto a labyrinth. It is also this background reserve that we are calling the pharmacy. . . .

Theuth comes to make his second appearance on the Platonic scene. In the *Phaedrus*, the inventor of the *pharmakon* gave a long speech in person and presented his letters as credentials to the King. More concise, more indirect, more allusive, his other intervention seems to us just as philosophically remarkable. It occurs in the name not of the invention of graphics but of grammar, of the science of grammar as a science of differences. It is in the beginning of the *Philebus*: the debate is open on the relations between pleasure (*khairein*) and intelligence or prudence (*phronein*) (11d). The discussion soon founders on the problem of limits. And hence, as in the *Timaeus*, on the composition of the same and the other, the one and the multiple, the finite and the infinite. ". . . the men of old, who were better than ourselves and dwelt nearer the gods, passed on this gift in the form of a saying. All things, as it ran, that are ever said to be consist of a one and a many, and have in their nature a conjunction (*en hautois sumphuton*) of limit and unlimitedness (*peras de kai apeirian*)."<sup>10</sup> Socrates opposes dialectics, the art of respecting the intermediate forms (*ta mesa*), to eristic, which immediately leaps toward the infinite (16c–17a). This time, in contrast to what happens in the *Phaedrus*, letters are charged with the task of introducing clarity (*saphēneia*) into discourse:

*Protarchus*: I think I understand, more or less, part of what you say, Socrates, but there are some points I want to get further cleared up.

*Socrates*: My meaning, Protarchus, is surely clear in the case of the alphabet; so take the letter of your school days as illustrating it.

*Protarchus*: How do you mean?

*Socrates*: The sound (*phōnē*) that proceeds through our mouths, yours and mine and everybody's, is one, isn't it, and also an unlimited variety?

*Protarchus*: To be sure.

*Socrates*: And we have no real understanding if we stop short at knowing it either simply as an unlimited variety, or simply as one. What makes a man "lettered" is knowing the number and the kinds of sounds. (17a–b)

After a detour through the example of musical intervals (*diastēmata*), Socrates goes back to letters in an effort to explain phonic intervals and differences:

*Socrates*: . . . We might take our letters again to illustrate what I mean now. . . . The unlimited variety of sound was once discerned by some god, or perhaps some godlike man; you know the story that there was some such

person in Egypt called Theuth. He it was who originally discerned the existence, in that unlimited variety, of the vowels (*ta phōnēnta*) – not "vowel" in the singular but "vowels" in the plural – and then of other things which, though they could not be called articulate sounds, yet were noises of a kind. There were a number of them, too, not just one, and as a third class he discriminated what we now call the mutes (*aphōna*). Having done that, he divided up the noiseless ones or mutes (*aphthongā kai aphōna*) until he got each one by itself, and did the same thing with the vowels and the intermediate sounds; in the end he found a number of the things, and affixed to the whole collection, as to each single member of it, the name "letters" (*stoikheion*). It was because he realized that none of us could get to know one of the collection all by itself, in isolation from all the rest, that he conceived of "letter" as a kind of bond of unity (*desmon*) uniting as it were all these sounds into one, and so he gave utterance to the expression "art of letters," implying that there was one art that dealt with the sounds. (18b–d)

The scriptural "metaphor" thus crops up every time difference and relation are irreducible, every time otherness introduces determination and puts a system in circulation. The play of the other within being must needs be designated "writing" by Plato in a discourse which would like to think of itself as spoken in essence, in truth, and which nevertheless is written. . . .

Grammatical science is doubtless not in itself dialectics. Plato indeed explicitly subordinates the former to the latter (253b–c). And, to him, this distinction can be taken for granted; but what, in the final analysis, justifies it? Both are in a sense sciences of language. For dialectics is also the science that guides us "*dia tōn logōn*," on the voyage through discourses or arguments (253b). At this point, what distinguishes dialectics from grammar appears twofold: on the one hand, the linguistic units it is concerned with are larger than the word (*Cratylus*, 385a–393d); on the other, dialectics is always guided by an intention of truth. It can only be satisfied by the presence of the *eidos*, which is here both the signified and the referent: the thing itself. The distinction between grammar and dialectics can thus only in all rigor be established at the point where truth is fully present and fills the *logos*.<sup>11</sup> But what the parricide in the *Sophist* [the way writing and difference break up the unity of being and kill off the paternal instance of presence and of truth] establishes is not only that any *full, absolute* presence of what *is* (of the being-present that most truly "is": the good or the sun that can't be looked in the face) is impossible; not only that any full intuition of truth, any truth-filled intuition, is impossible; but that the very condition of discourse – *true or false* – is the diacritical principle of the *sumphōkē*. If truth is the presence of the *eidos*, it must always, on pain of mortal blinding by the sun's fires, come to terms with relation, nonpresence, and thus nontruth. It then follows that the absolute precondition for a rigorous difference between grammar and dialectics (or ontology) cannot in principle be fulfilled. Or at least, it can perhaps be fulfilled at the root of the principle, at the point of arche-being or arche-truth, but that point has been crossed out by the necessity

recessing  
gated  
substitution  
supplement  
placement

of parricide. Which means, by the very necessity of *logos*. And that is the difference that prevents there being *in fact* any difference between grammar and ontology.

But now, what is the impossibility of any truth or of any full presence of being, of any fully-being? Or inversely, since such truth would be death as the absolute form of blindness, what is death as truth? Not what is? since the form of that question is produced by the very thing it questions, but how is the impossible plenitude of any absolute presence of the *ontos* on written? How is it inscribed? How is the necessity of the multiplicity of genres and ideas, of relation and difference, prescribed? How is dialectics traced?

The absolute invisibility of the origin of the visible, of the good-sun-father-capital, the unattainment of presence or beingness in any form, the whole surplus Plato calls *epekeina tēs ousias* (beyond beingness or presence), gives rise to a structure of replacements such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin, and all differences, within the system of presence, will be the irreducible effect of what remains *epekeina tēs ousias*.

Just as Socrates supplements and replaces the father, as we have seen, dialectics supplements and replaces the impossible *noesis*, the forbidden intuition of the face of the father (good-sun-capital). The withdrawal of that face both opens and limits the exercise of dialectics. It welds it irremediably to its “inferiors,” the mimetic arts, play, grammar, writing, etc. The disappearance of that face is the movement of difference which violently opens writing or, if one prefers, which opens itself to writing and which writing opens for itself. All these “movements,” in all these “senses,” belong to the same “system.” Also belonging to that same system are the proposition in the *Republic*, describing in nonviolent terms the inaccessibility of the father *epekeina tēs ousias*, and the patricidal proposal which, proffered by the Stranger, threatens the paternal *logos*. And which by the same token threatens the domestic, hierarchical inferiority of the pharmacy, the proper order and healthy movement of goods, the lawful prescription of its controlled, classed, measured, labeled products, rigorously divided into remedies and poisons, seeds of life and seeds of death, good and bad traces, the unity of metaphysics, of technology, of well computed binarism. This philosophical, dialectical mastery of the *pharmaka* that should be handed down from legitimate father to well-born son is constantly put in question by a family scene that constitutes and undermines at once the passage between the pharmacy and the house. “Platonism” is both the general *rehearsal* of this family scene and the most powerful effort to master it, to prevent anyone’s ever hearing of it, to conceal it by drawing the curtains over the dawning of the West. How can we set off in search of a different guard, if the pharmaceutical “system” contains not only, in a single stranglehold, the scene in the *Phaedrus*, the scene in the *Republic*, the scene in the *Sophist*, and the dialectics, logic, and mythology of Plato, but also, it seems, certain non-Greek structures of mythology? And if it is not certain that there are such things as non-Greek “mythologies” – the opposition *mythos/logos* being only authorized following Plato – into what general, unnameable necessity are we thrown? In other words, what does Platonism signify as repetition?

To repeat: the disappearance of the good-father-capital-sun is thus the

$X$  comes into being with, in

precondition of discourse, taken this time as a moment and not as a principle of generalized writing. That writing (is) *epekeina tēs ousias*. The disappearance of truth as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence, is the condition of all (manifestation of) truth. Nontruth is the truth. Nonpresence is presence. Difference, the disappearance of any originary presence, is at once the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of truth. At once. "At once" means that the being-present (on) in its truth, in the presence of its identity and in the identity of its presence, is doubled as soon as it appears, as soon as it presents itself. It appears, in its essence, as the possibility of its own most proper nontruth, of its pseudotruth reflected in the icon, the phantasm, or the simulacrum. What is not what it is, identical and identical to itself, unique, unless it adds to itself the possibility of being repeated as such. And its identity is hollowed out by that addition withdraws itself in the supplement that presents it.

The disappearance of the Face or the structure of repetition can thus no longer be dominated by the value of truth. On the contrary, the opposition between the true and the untrue is entirely comprehended, inscribed, within this structure or this generalized writing. The true and the untrue are both species of repetition. And there is no repetition possible without the graphics of supplementarity, which supplies, for the lack of a full unity, another unit that comes to relieve it, being enough the same and enough other so that it can replace by addition. Thus, on the one hand, repetition is that without which there would be no truth: the truth of being in the intelligible form of ideality discovers in the *eidos* that which can be repeated, being the same, the clear, the stable, the identifiable in its equality with itself. And only the *eidos* can give rise to repetition as anamnesis or maieutics, dialectics or didactics. Here repetition gives itself out to be a repetition of life. Tautology is life only going out of itself to come home to itself. Keeping close to itself through *mnēmē*, *logos*, and *phōnē*. But on the other hand, repetition is the very movement of nontruth: the presence of what is gets lost, disperses itself, multiplies itself through mimemes, icons, phantasms, simulacra, etc. Through phenomena, already. And this type of repetition is the possibility of becoming-perceptible-to-the-senses: nonideality. This is on the side of nonphilosophy, bad memory, hypomnesia, writing. Here, tautology is life going out of itself beyond return. Death rehearsal. Unreserved spending. The irreducible excess, through the play of the supplement, of any self-intimacy of the living, the good, the true. —

These two types of repetition relate to each other according to the graphics of supplementarity. Which means that one can no more "separate" them from each other, think of either one apart from the other, "label" them, than one can in the pharmacy distinguish the medicine from the poison, the good from the evil, the true from the false, the inside from the outside, the vital from the mortal, the first from the second, etc. Conceived within this original reversibility, the *pharmakon* is the same precisely because it has no identity. And the same (is) as supplement. Or in differance. In writing. If he had meant to say something, such would have been the speech of Theuth making of writing as a *pharmakon* a singular present to the King.

But Theuth, it should be noted, spoke not another word.  
The great god's sentence went unanswered.

## Notes

- 1 There are two major traditions in philosophy, the materialist and the idealist. Plato is one of the major idealist philosophers, and in this essay, Derrida renews and refines the materialist critique of the idealist position by focusing on the idealist claim that meaning, truth, and reason exist apart from and above signification in language, which is considered a merely derivative addition or supplement to the true idea present in the mind or logos. Plato describes that logos as a father and a king to suggest its authority in relation to writing particularly, which should obediently represent truth but which can lead truth astray or off its intended path. This was Plato's quarrel with the Sophists, a rival group of philosophers who taught Greek youth to use language to argue points without, according to Plato, training them in proper reasoning. Only when ideas are present is there truth, and without true ideas the techniques of representation such as the memorizing of passages in order to repeat them are the bearers of falsehood. This is why Plato uses an ambivalent word – *pharmakon*, which means both poison and cure – as a metaphor for writing. Writing endangers true ideas by offering a simulacrum of truth that need not contain true ideas, yet it is an addition or supplement to true ideas that allow them to be communicated. Derrida argues that this Platonic opposition, like all other oppositions Plato uses to order the world into simple binaries such as good/evil, true/false, reason/writing, etc., cannot be sustained. He notices points of ambivalence where the opposed terms weave together, much as the *pharmakon* weaves together two entirely incommensurable meanings. For example, true ideas (such as Beauty, Justice, etc. which Plato thought existed outside time and were universal and eternal) can be true or eternal only by being infinitely repeatable. They must be as compellingly true a million years from now. Yet repetition is one of the characteristics of writing and of external signification that disqualifies it from truthfulness. Similarly, memory (*mnesis*), which for Plato is our way of recalling the true eternal ideas that live in our minds and of maintaining a living connection with them, cannot be cleanly separated from memorization (*hypomnesis*), the external addition of a technique that bears no living relation to ideas and is characterized by the entry into type of truth. Plato wants there to be a living memory apart from types, but he cannot describe it without inferring its dependence on such types or *tupoi*. The significance of *pharmakon*, then, is that it draws attention to this fundamental ambivalence, where ideas and representations mix and where it becomes impossible to maintain oppositions of the Platonic variety in the face of a more primordial differential weaving together of terms such that truth cannot rigorously be opposed to everything that Plato thinks is false, especially writing, representation, and grammar. Dialectics, the science of logical reasoning, becomes inseparable for Derrida from grammar and from all of those arts of writing usually banished by idealist philosophy to the side of mere literature. This is the significance for Derrida of Plato's recourse to myths or stories, such as that of Theuth, in his elaboration of a philosophy of supposedly pure ideas. That recourse says something about the profound complicity of ideas and representation and of truth and all the signifying traits and techniques usually expelled as writing. Platonism and idealism in general are attempts to master that fundamental complicity and weaving

together of things Platonism considers incommensurable – truth and what is supposedly false, ideas and the graphic techniques as well as the differential relays and detours of writing, presence and absence, full immediacy and empty repetition, etc. At stake is the authority of the father(s) and of all paternalist authorities that would dictate truth.

- 2 For Plato, Thamus is doubtless another name for Ammon, whose figure (that of the sun king and of the father of the gods) we shall sketch out later for its own sake. On this question and the debate to which it has given rise, see Frutiger, *Mythes*, p. 233, n. 2, and notably Eisler, "Platon und das ägyptische Alphabet," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* (1922); Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (art. Ammon); Roscher, *Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (art. Thamus).
- 3 Derrida refers to the myth of the *cave* in which Plato describes humans as being chained facing in one direction. Behind them is a fire and in front of it, forms are paraded that cast shadows on the wall in front of the chained humans. They see only the shadows and can only infer the existence of the fire. According to Plato, this is the human condition in the face of eternal ideas, which are like the fire. We can only see reflections or representations of them, never the presence of the true ideas themselves. [Eds.]
- 4 A. Erman, *La Religion des Egyptiens* (Paris: Payot), pp. 90–1.
- 5 Thus it is that the god of writing can become the god of creative speech. This is a structural possibility derived from his supplementary status and from the logic of the supplement. The same can also be seen to occur in the evolution of the history of mythology. Festugière, in particular, points this out: "Thoth, however, does not remain content with this secondary rank. At the time when the priests in Egypt were forging cosmogonies in which the local clergy of each area sought to give the primary role to the god it honored, the theologians of Hermopolis, who were competing with those of the Delta and of Heliopolis, elaborated a cosmogony in which the principal share fell to Thoth. Since Thoth was a magician, and since he knew of the power of sounds which, when emitted properly, unfailingly produce their effect, it was by means of voice, of speech, or rather, incantation, that Thoth was said to have created the world. Thoth's voice is thus creative: it shapes and creates; and, condensing and solidifying into matter, it becomes a being. Thoth becomes identified with his breath; his exhalation alone causes all things to be born. It is not impossible that these Hermopolitan speculations may offer some similarity with the *Logos* of the Greeks – at once Speech, Reason, and Demiurge – and with the *Sophia* of the Alexandrian Jews; perhaps the Priests of Thoth even underwent, well before the Christian era, the influence of Greek thought, but this cannot be solidly affirmed" (*Les Mythes de Platon* (Paris, 1930), p. 68).
- 6 Morenz, *La Religion égyptienne* (Paris, 1962), pp. 47–8.
- 7 Ibid., p. 41.
- 8 Boylan, *Thoth: The Hermes of Egypt* (London, 1922), pp. 62–75; Vandier, *La Religion égyptienne* (Paris, 1949), p. 65; Morenz, *La Religion égyptienne*, p. 54; Festugière, *Les Mythes de Platon*, p. 67.
- 9 Morenz, *La Religion égyptienne*, p. 95. Another of Thoth's companions is Maat, goddess of truth. She is also "daughter of Ra, mistress of the sky, she who governs the double country, the eye of Ra which has no match." Erman, in the page devoted to Maat, notes: "one of her insignia, God knows why, was a vulture feather" (*La Religion des Egyptiens*, p. 82).
- 10 We would here like to refer the reader in particular to the extremely rich text by Jean-Pierre Vernant (who deals with these questions with quite different intentions):

“Aspects mythiques de la mémoire et du temps,” in *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (Paris: Maspéro, 1965). On the word *tupos*, its relations with *perigraphē* and *paradeigma*, cf. A. von Blumenthal, *Tupos und Paradeigma*, quoted by P. M. Schuh; in *Platon et l'art de son temps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952), p. 18, n. 4.

11 The structure of this problematic is entirely analogous in the *Logical Investigations* of Husserl. See *Speech and Phenomena*. One will also reread in a new way, since it is a matter of *sumploκē* and *pharmakon*, the end of the *Statesman*. In his work of weaving (*sumploκē*), the royal weaver will be able to interweave his web through the joining of the opposites of which virtue is composed. Literally, the *sumploκē*, the weaving, is intricated with the *pharmakon*: “But in those of noble nature from their earliest days whose nurture too has been all it should be, the laws can foster the growth of this common bond of conviction (*kata phusin monois dia nomōn emphuesthai*). This is the talisman (*pharmakon*) appointed for them by the design of pure intelligence. This most godlike bond alone can unite the elements of goodness which are diverse in nature and would else be opposing in tendency” (310a).

# CHAPTER 12

## Revolution in Poetic Language

Julia Kristeva

[I]t seems possible to perceive a signifying practice which, although produced in language, is only intelligible *through* it. By exploding the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic object of linguistics, this practice . . . escapes the attempted hold of all anthropomorphic sciences. . . . Ultimately, it exhausts the ever tenacious ideological institutions and apparatuses, thereby demonstrating the limits of formalist and psychoanalytic devices.<sup>1</sup> This signifying practice – a particular type of modern literature – attests to a “crisis” of social structures and their ideological, coercive, and necrophilic manifestations. . . . [W]ith Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Joyce, and Artaud, to name only a few, this crisis represents a new phenomenon. For the capitalist mode of production produces and marginalizes, but simultaneously exploits for its own regeneration, one of the most spectacular shatterings of discourse. By exploding the subject and his ideological limits, this phenomenon has a triple effect, and raises three sets of questions:

- 1 Because of its specific isolation within the discursive totality of our time, this shattering of discourse reveals that linguistic changes constitute changes in the *status of the subject* – his relation to the body, to others, and to objects; it also reveals that normalized language is just one of the ways of articulating the signifying process that encompasses the body, the material referent, and language itself. How are these strata linked? What is their interrelation within signifying practice?
- 2 The shattering further reveals that the capitalist mode of production, having attained a highly developed means of production through science and technology, no longer need remain strictly *within* linguistic and ideological *norms*, but can also integrate their *process qua process*. As art, this shattering can display the productive basis of subjective and ideological signifying formations – a foundation that primitive societies call “sacred” and modernity has rejected as “schizophrenia.” What is the extent of this integration? Under what conditions does it become indispensable, censured, repressed, or marginal?
- 3 Finally, in the history of signifying systems and notably that of the arts, religion, and rites, there emerge, in retrospect, fragmentary phenomena which have been kept in the background or rapidly integrated into more communal signifying